

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

A Regional Look at the New River Valley

GOAL

Partner with federal, state, and local governments, businesses, industries, and other area stakeholders to facilitate effective, two-way communication in order to plan and to develop as a unified region.

BACKGROUND

Local governments have a tendency to plan within their own boundaries, giving little consideration to decisions that affect adjacent neighbors. Every locality can identify examples of this phenomenon, and it takes considerable determination and effort to devote the time and commitment necessary for significant communication to take place, and for positive results to show. Effective two-way communication is the key to good regional coordination. The New River Valley has many tools available, through which it can continue to build good government relations.

Description

[New River Valley Planning District Commission](#)

In September 1969, the New River Valley Planning District Commission (NRVPDC) was organized by its member jurisdictions and accepted the charge of the general provisions of the Virginia Area Development Act. This act was amended and reenacted in 1995 by the General Assembly as the "*Regional Cooperation Act*". The Act added governmental cooperation to purposes of the Commission. The overall goal of the NRVPDC is "to encourage and facilitate local government cooperation in addressing on a regional basis problems of greater than local significance."

The Regional Cooperation Act envisions five objectives:

1. The provision of effective area-wide planning for the physical, social and economic elements of the District.
2. To provide, encourage and assist local governments in planning for their future development.
3. To provide a means of coordinating federal, state, and local efforts to resolve area problems.
4. To provide a forum for review of mutual concerns.
5. To implement services upon request of member local governments.

As indicated by the above objectives, the New River Valley Planning District Commission serves as a forum for addressing regional or multi-jurisdictional issues and concerns, and provides technical assistance as requested. The New River Valley Bikeway/Walkway Plan is one major ongoing project. This regional bike plan integrates Blacksburg's Greenway Master Plan into the surrounding area; vastly impacting the total miles of planned trail and connectivity between trail systems. The NRVPC is positioned to play a pivotal role in the future implementation of this regional trail system. Other regional projects include a regional rail connection to the area through the Bristol Rail Station study; a Town/Tech and Army Corp of Engineers storm water study for Blacksburg and surrounding areas of Montgomery County; the Magnet School; New River Valley Airport and the Foreign Trade Zone and Customs House established there; the New River Resource Authority to handle solid waste on a regional basis; New River Valley Regional Jail; the Commerce Park project, a multi-jurisdictional industrial park to serve the region; and the New River Valley Competitiveness Center. The NRVPC also provides services like facilitation training for area leaders and citizens, and grant writing, corridor studies, and feasibility studies as needed for community development.

The New River Valley Planning District Commission is funded through various sources as follows:

Member jurisdictions	10.0% (based on population)
Local grants	33.0%
State grants	37.0%
Federal grants	17.5%
Other	2.5%

The composition of the NRVPC has traditionally been one elected and one appointed member from each of its founding jurisdictions (Floyd, Giles, Montgomery and Pulaski Counties, the City of Radford, and the Towns of Blacksburg, Christiansburg, and Pulaski) and one revolving member. In 2000, the NRVPC enhanced the composition of the Commission because it felt that the smaller towns and the universities should have seats at the regional table to discuss proposed changes, and opportunities to increase cooperation and competitiveness within the region and beyond. The new members include two representatives from Virginia Tech, and one elected representative each from Radford University, and from the towns of Pearisburg, Narrows, Rich Creek, and Floyd.

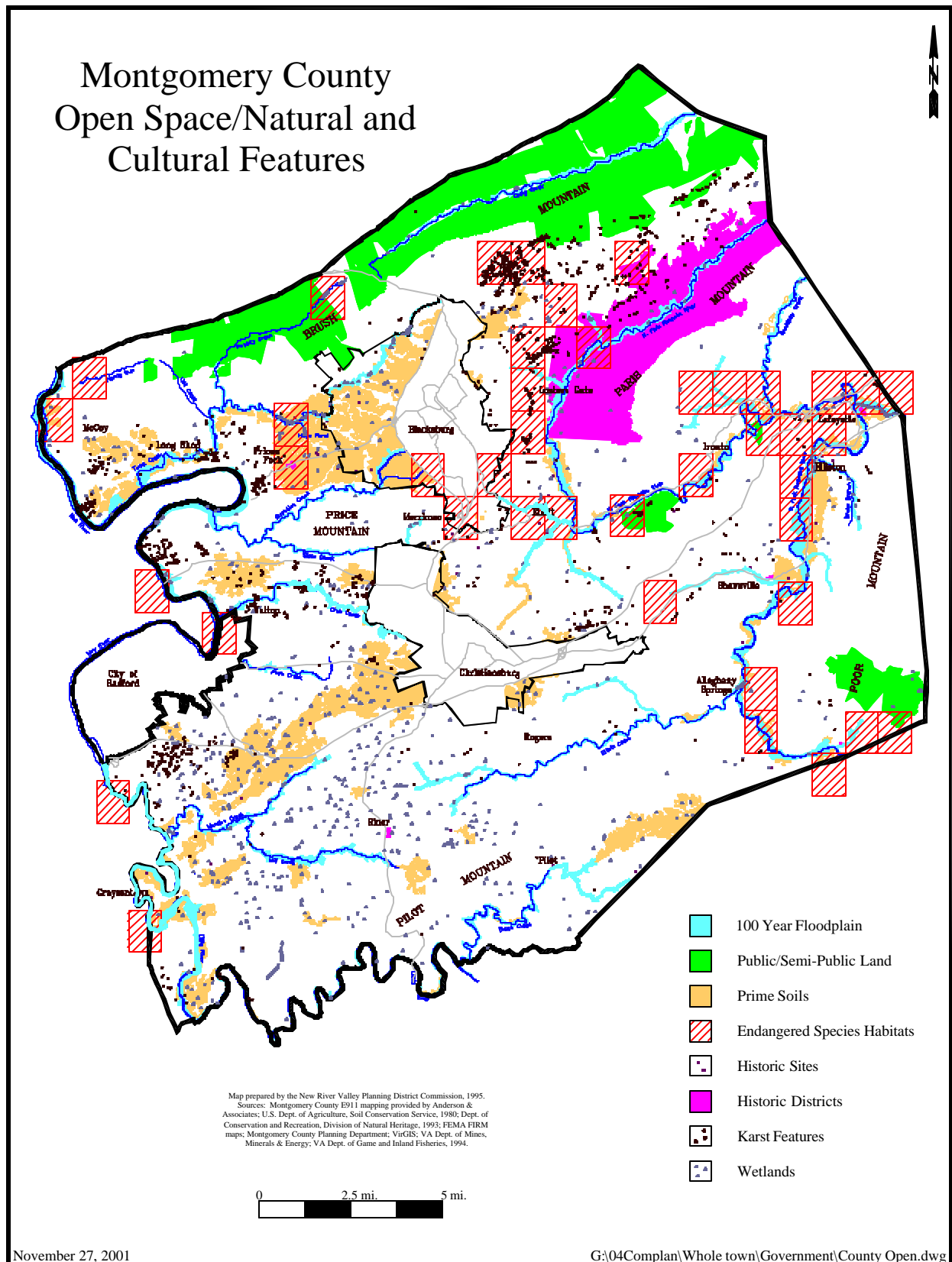


Figure GR-1, Montgomery County Open Space/Natural and Cultural Features

Virginia Tech

Since 1872 Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, popularly known as Virginia Tech, has evolved into a comprehensive university of national and international recognition. As Virginia's largest university with over 25,000 students, and as one of the top 50 research institutions in the nation, it is an establishment that believes in putting



Figure GR-2, Burruss, Virginia Tech

knowledge to work. Outreach efforts focus on education and the dissemination of knowledge. Virginia Tech is a national leader in developing and using new instructional technologies. Virginia Tech has a long history of providing innovative distance learning techniques--satellite video conferencing, multimedia, interactive video, interactive computer conferencing, web-based courses, etc.--to meet the various needs of working adults and other nontraditional students. The university's eight colleges - [agriculture](#), [architecture](#), [arts/sciences](#), [business](#), [human resources/education](#), [engineering](#), [natural resources](#), and [veterinary medicine](#) - offer more degree programs than any other university in the state with 71 undergraduate and 147 graduate programs.¹

The university is unique in that it is a separate entity, primarily self sufficient, and owned and operated by the Commonwealth, while it also remains an integral part of the larger Blacksburg community. The town views Virginia Tech as a large neighborhood, like others in Blacksburg, as it has strengths and weaknesses that impact other parts of the community.

The town maintains formal and informal relations with the university administration. There are two formal methods of communication that have been established. The Town/Tech Liaison Committee is comprised of high-level university administration, town management, and two Town Council members. The Town/Gown Community Relations Committee focuses on neighborhood, student, or campus-town oriented issues and is comprised of many representatives including a Town Council member, a Blacksburg Neighborhood Federation member, several student government representatives, planning staff, the Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs, and the Vice President of Residential Programs. There is also representation on the committee for rental property owners that rotates among local managers.

¹ Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University.
<http://www.vt.edu/2000/theuniversity/aboutvt.jhtml>, November 2000.

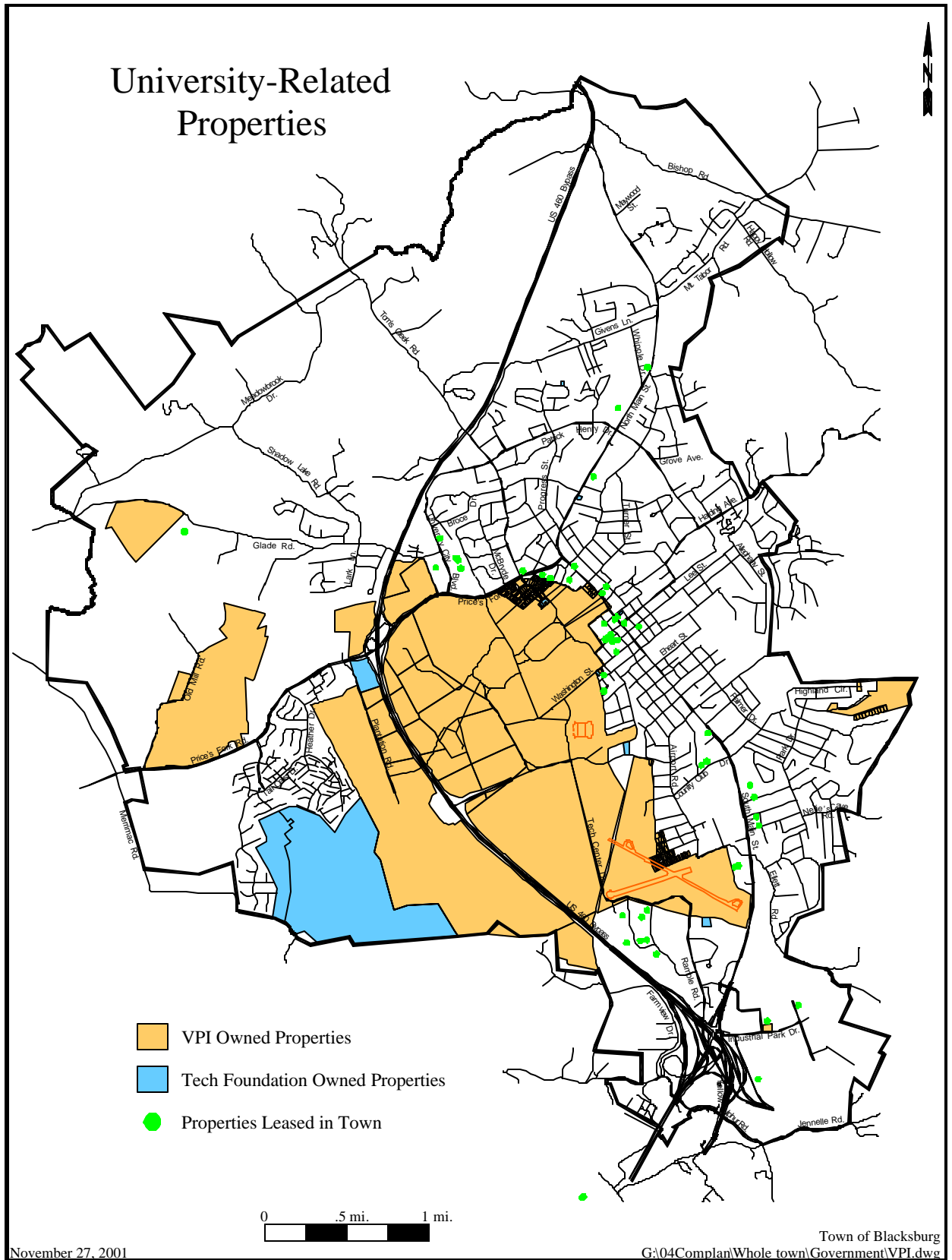


Figure GR-3, University-Related Properties

Montgomery County

Montgomery County traces its origin back to 1776 when it was formed and named after General Richard Montgomery, an American hero of the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. The first settlement, Draper's Meadow, was established in the 1740's but was destroyed by Shawnee Indians during the French and Indian War.

Montgomery County continues to grow and support a well-diversified economy. Since the 1970's, the county's industrial base has experienced healthy growth in the government, manufacturing, and trade and service industries. Montgomery County is an events-oriented community, and travelers attending major university and community events generate a significant amount of revenue for the county.²

The county has an increasingly progressive local government that works well with both towns within its borders—Blacksburg and Christiansburg. The Montgomery County Planning Commission provides a liaison to the Blacksburg Planning Commission, whose duties include serving as a voting member of the Blacksburg Long Range Planning Committee, which is a subcommittee of the Commission. Likewise, Blacksburg rotates its commissioners monthly for Montgomery County Planning Commission meetings, so that each member is afforded an opportunity to observe a different commission meeting.

This formal connection between the two governments has positive impacts on local development, as well as on staff relations. Senior administration and planning staff from both localities meet regularly to discuss various items of concern or matters of mutual interest. These meetings, which are separate levels of interaction, have been useful in maintaining the continuity of local knowledge and politics, discussing both long and short range planning goals and projects, and exchanging different techniques and outlooks on a wide variety of issues.

The Montgomery County Public Information Office also communicates well with staff and citizens in the entire county, including both towns. Blacksburg's Public Information Office, created in July 2000, has further improved this relationship and increased communication between governments and the community.

² Montgomery County, VA. <http://www.montva.com/>, 2001.

Town of Christiansburg

Christiansburg was incorporated in 1792 and named in honor of Colonel William Christian. This community was an important stop on the Wilderness Road, which roughly corresponds to the present day U.S. Route 11. Christiansburg serves as the county seat and is the retail center of the New River Valley.³



Figure GR-4, Downtown Christiansburg

As with Montgomery County, the Town of Christiansburg also participates in regional administrative meetings. Both town managers meet with the county administrator monthly to discuss issues of regional concern such as solid waste management, Virginia Tech airport operations, sewer and water extensions, communication, transportation, and many other issues of common interest. Planning staff from all three governments meet quarterly on a less formal basis to discuss similar matters. Additionally, the two towns share many interests and similar operational concerns, which provides a good base for productive communication.

³ Montgomery County, VA. <http://www.montva.com/>, 2001.

Opportunities

- ◆ Strengthen the formal and informal relationships that have been established between jurisdictions.
- ◆ Promote the Blacksburg Industrial Park and Corporate Research Center to attract international and national business, while retaining local business in the region.
- ◆ Utilize the local chambers of commerce to promote the area's towns, counties, and local businesses.
- ◆ Utilize the general aviation airport, transit system, and other regional transportation initiatives to attract businesses to the area.
- ◆ Effectively leverage local research and development opportunities afforded by the universities.

Challenges

- ◆ Strengthen communication, planning, and coordination of operations between jurisdictions.
- ◆ Improve the accuracy and frequency of land management information received from Montgomery County.
- ◆ Create a strong regional identity and create regional partnerships for projects to improve the New River Valley.
- ◆ Align priorities for collaborative projects among participating jurisdictions.
- ◆ Create seamless boundaries between communities.
- ◆ Integrating volunteer and paid public safety personnel throughout the region.
- ◆ Provide for the wide variety of interests in the community with limited recreational facilities.
- ◆ Sustain the current and anticipated growth of the region with limited child day care facilities.

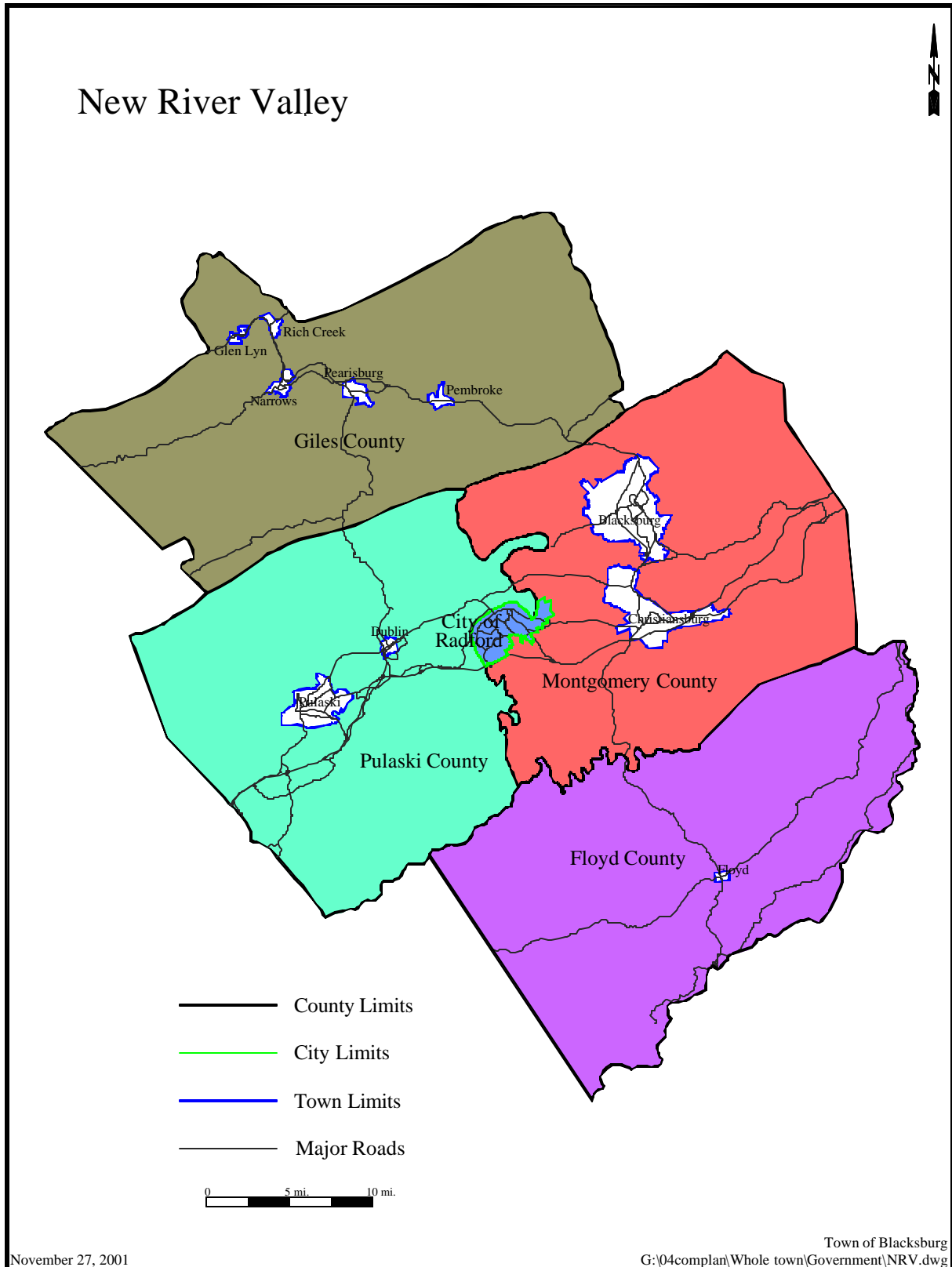


Figure GR-5, New River Valley

What is Changing

Transportation

The Blacksburg Transit continues to expand service to outlying areas including Christiansburg and Montgomery County, and is also creating new routes throughout Town. The transit system is planning to connect both proposed and existing regional transportation systems.



Figure GR-6, NRV Mall Bus Stop

Virginia Tech works closely with Blacksburg Transit on a variety of programs. The university is exploring a satellite parking system along with a Park & Ride program to reduce on-campus traffic and to provide a more efficient, pedestrian friendly transportation system. Two pilot alternative transportation programs include shared pathways (allowing bikes on some university sidewalks) and a lottery parking system. University administration continues to encourage students to utilize the local transit system that is partially funded by student fees.

Virginia Tech, Montgomery County, Christiansburg, and Blacksburg have created the Virginia Tech / Montgomery Executive Airport, a regional authority to guide future operations at the general aviation airport. Operation under an authority gives the community a forum to comment on and influence the airport's activities. The airport is expected to play a vital role in Virginia Tech's plan to expand their graduate program and to become a top-30 research university. This goal will require at least \$100 million above the current \$175 million currently spent on research.

Land Use

Blacksburg and Montgomery County have been working together to plan for a seamless transition between zoning and land uses at the town's boundaries. The Blacksburg (3A) Interchange and the Route 460 Bypass through Christiansburg to Interstate 81 present a particular challenge as most of the land along this corridor lies either in the county or in the Town of Christiansburg. The bypass will



Figure GR-7, Blacksburg Interchange

serve as the main entrance to Blacksburg, however, and development will have significant visual impacts on both towns and the county along this prominent route. It is the desire of the county and the Town of Blacksburg to preserve this view shed to the furthest extent possible by planning for development that is sensitive to the natural environment, while also providing for the area's residential and commercial needs. The Town of Christiansburg plays a pivotal role in this

area's development and their participation in joint planning with the county is encouraged.

Town boundary adjustments should be considered when the result will be enhanced levels of service delivery to the citizen and increased efficiency in government operations. Initial consideration should be given to incorporating existing or planned neighborhoods that are partially divided by the town's corporate limits into the town.

Utility extensions are a common catalyst for development and can have a profound impact on an area's future land use. The unique rural and scenic character of the region may be easily compromised without a strong and detailed plan to control and direct growth. A comprehensive water and sewer agreement is needed between the town and county to address these issues. This issue will be most effectively addressed through regional cooperation and a unified policy.

The location of cellular towers has emerged as a leading issue in this region and across the nation. Montgomery County has played a lead role by pulling the area's local governments together to derive a better understanding of the telecommunication industry. The goal is to formulate better, and more consistent, land use regulations to control the proliferation of tower structures and to mitigate their potentially negative impact on the region's view shed. The Town of Blacksburg currently allows cellular antennas by-right if they are ten feet or lower in height on any structure. This minimizes the visual impact of the structures while allowing for their proliferation according to industry demand. Telecommunication facilities within Town are strongly encouraged to utilize state-of-the-art stealth technology, and tower structures are restricted to certain areas by Special Use Permit only. These land use policies are discussed in detail in the *Community Design* chapter.



Neighborhood Planning

The town recognizes the Virginia Tech campus as one of two-dozen neighborhoods town-wide. Blacksburg's Neighborhood Enhancement Program (NEP) has strengthened the existing Town/Gown committee, which has in turn developed initiatives to educate students on the responsibilities associated with off-campus living such as good citizenship, transportation alternatives, and alcohol awareness. The committee will continue to educate citizens, to increase enforcement, to promote intervention and assessment, and to improve resources

for these issues. Recent studies, as exemplified by a decrease in student perceptions about using alcohol by almost half, and subsequent decreases in at-risk drinking and high-risk drinking, show the positive results of such communication.

The Planning Commission has also formed a Neighborhood Planning Committee to address issues associated with NEP, to implement a neighborhood matching grant program, and to assist with the development of neighborhood master plans. In the first year of the program, 2000, this committee dispersed \$10,000 in approved funds to five different neighborhoods. Since then, many

neighborhoods have shown interest in developing master plans and applying for future matching funds.



*Figure GR-9, Apperson/Dickerson
Neighborhood*

Historic Preservation

The cultural resources of Montgomery County significantly enhance the character and ambiance of the region. The preservation and enhancement of these cultural resources strengthens the unique qualities of the New River Valley. Montgomery County currently has eleven (11) historic districts designated on both the State and National Register of Historic Places. The districts are:

- Blacksburg Historic District
- Cambria Historic District
- East Main Street Historic District (Christiansburg)
- Lafayette Historic District
- Miller Southside Historic District
- North Fork Valley Rural Historic District
- Piedmont Camp Meeting Grounds Historic District
- Price's Fork Historic District
- Riner Historic District
- Shawsville Historic District
- South Franklin Street Historic District

Each of these historic districts are distinctive and offer features that differ in architectural style and significance. Strengthening each of these districts will improve the regional historic fabric and tie the cultural resources of the county more closely together. The development of a County real-estate tax incentive is a tool that can be used to facilitate the preservation and maintenance of these culturally significant areas. Also, effective marketing of the region's cultural and natural resources can provide a strong impetus for the heritage tourism industry.

Economic Diversity

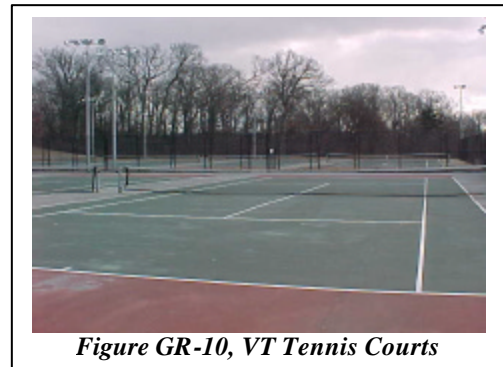
The local business community desires a more open relationship with the university. Private, local services could be offered on campus for the convenience of students attending classes, dining, or living on-campus. Many students and residents also desire a downtown sundries store, such as a drug store that would mesh with the historic character of the area. The town will continue to work with Virginia Tech on preserving and strengthening Blacksburg's commercial diversity. Zoning changes within the town's boundaries have also been encouraged by County representatives to attract retail, such as national chains tailored to Blacksburg's unique niche market.

The town completed two studies in 2001 to assess the municipal costs expected from future development, related economic impacts, and methods to strengthen and diversify the local economy. The Cost of Land Use and Economic Development studies were strongly correlated with the Downtown Master Plan, also completed in 2001. These planning tools recommend the creation of an economic development corporation to improved joint planning between Blacksburg, Christiansburg, Montgomery County, and Virginia Tech.

The regional airport authority can be an effective tool for the region's economic development. This arrangement, another cooperative effort between Montgomery County's four primary jurisdictions, will support regional economic development activities associated with business, industry, and university related research and development.

Recreation

The joint use of some recreational facilities is desired and supported by the community. The town has a deficit of tennis courts and soccer fields that could be supplemented by Virginia Tech's amenities. University facilities are not formally open to non-students, but all citizens may use the town's limited facilities. Joint use opportunities also exist with the county at all school locations, Nellie's Cave Park, Ellett Valley Park, and numerous trails.



Blacksburg is promoting the town as a location for a professional minor league baseball team. The town could work with Virginia Tech to utilize English Field for this purpose. Preferably, an Appalachian League Rookie team would be recruited to play other regional teams including Pulaski, Danville, Martinsville, Bristol, Princeton, and Bluefield.

Student Housing

The Town/Gown Community Relations Committee, along with the Off-campus Housing and Tech Legal Service offices proactively support student relationships with, and integration into, area neighborhoods. Educational welcome packets have been developed to help students adapt to their independent surroundings. Future initiatives will provide property managers, agents and owners with technical assistance, lease addendums for landlords and managers, and will include discussion of rent stabilization policies. These programs are intended to support the health, safety and welfare of rental housing by providing resources for rental agents to resolve issues and concerns that adversely impact the quality of housing available.

The town has a limited capacity for additional off-campus housing in the form of medium and high-density units. Many residents feel saturated with “student housing.” Additionally, it will become increasingly difficult for properties to be rezoned to multi-family housing as the town’s land continues to develop. Consequently, as the university continues to expand, the pressure for more on-campus housing will increase due to the limited capacity for off-campus housing within town limits.



Figure GR-11, Apartment Complex

Greek housing is an ongoing concern as off-campus fraternities and sororities have profound impacts on the residential nature of their neighborhoods. The neighborhood planning initiative uses a variety of resources to integrate these two contrasting lifestyles through communication and community service projects. The relocation of all Greek housing on-campus would facilitate a more stable relationship between the Greek system and the larger community.

Electronic Government (eGov)

Electronic Government (E-government or eGov) is a how governments deliver services to its citizens using technologies such as telephone, the Internet and other telecommunications means. As citizens become increasingly connected electronically, more demand is being placed on governments to provide their services via either the Internet or other information technologies.

In addition to connecting with citizens, local government must also connect electronically to all major stakeholders, most significantly other government entities. Efficient, accurate interaction is therefore critical to effective government. Blacksburg sends and receives land and tax information from Montgomery County; the town trades automobile and tax information with the

state; emergency services - Police, Fire, and Rescue - report information to state and federal agencies. Information is continually flowing in many directions.

A core goal of eGov is to automate as much of this communication as possible, thus improving both accuracy and efficiency which allows the town to better serve the public. Blacksburg is committed to enacting eGov strategies and building technical competencies to enhance relations with its eGov partners.

Emergency Services

The overlap of emergency services throughout the region is expected to continue and is encouraged. Technology is one tool advancing this trend in the form of a portable mapping system that gives emergency responders a plethora of detailed information while heading to a crime or accident scene. This system, a product of regional cooperation to develop a comprehensive Geographical Information System (GIS) emergency services database, demonstrates how technology can be used to improve response time and quality of service. The planning and implementation of this emergency system has involved many regional public safety and local government officials.

Blacksburg's planned Public Safety Center will likely be used by emergency personnel throughout the region for training exercises and classes. Blacksburg has plans for four fire and rescue stations that will provide increased coverage both in Town and to the emergency response service areas in the county. Joint cooperation between public service agencies will become increasingly necessary in the near future as the region's population continues to grow.

Day Care

The provision of continued and expanded child day care facilities for students, faculty, and staff is strongly desired. The existence of private day care in Town is severely limited and the university is encouraged to foster a private day care system to help fill this void. The day care system would act to supplement current levels of service while at the same time providing for the greater community.

The Corporate Research Center is exploring a day care system and the companies located in the Blacksburg Industrial Park are also encouraged to establish a child care service. The town will continue to encourage and foster this important component of any whole life community.

GENERAL POLICIES

- ❑ Establish new, and maintain existing, formal relationships between governing bodies aimed at mutual understanding and regional planning.
- ❑ Encourage proactive, well planned initiatives that keep the region ahead of the latest development issues.
- ❑ Maintain a healthy relationship with Virginia Tech and continue to utilize the Town/Tech Liaison and Town/Gown Community Relations committees.
- ❑ Communicate with local businesses and related interests to foster an atmosphere of support and to encourage sustainable economic development throughout the region.

ACTION STRATEGIES

in general

- Maintain a continuous, two-way line of communication between jurisdictions.
- Consider the incorporation of existing or planned neighborhoods that are partially divided by the town's corporate limits into the town when the result will be enhanced levels of service delivery to the citizen and increased efficiency in government operations.
- Market the region's economic diversity, universities, extensive transportation system, recreational and cultural amenities, and other resources.
- Apply for grants to initiate and to continue programs targeted at improving community relations, alcohol awareness, and other Town/Gown related issues.
- Expand Blacksburg Transit service throughout the region by adding more destinations, by increasing service frequencies where appropriate, and by establishing connections to regional transportation services when such services will reduce traffic on Town streets.
- Establish a close working relationship with the area's chambers of commerce and local businesses to help promote economic development and public services associated with new businesses.
- Continue working with Virginia Tech to strengthen and preserve the town's retail diversity and unique market niche.

within 5 years

- Participate in the regional airport authority with Virginia Tech, Montgomery County, and Christiansburg to more effectively control and market the future of the airport and the region's economy.
- Complete and begin implementation of a regional transportation study under the direction of the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT).
- Facilitate regional cooperation among New River Valley governments to automate the sharing of information electronically.
- Work with Virginia Tech to limit the number of vehicles registered on campus for most, or all, freshman and sophomores. This is an increasing trend throughout the country due to the severe constraints parking places on a university's limited land, particularly around the core campus area, and would encourage increased use of the Blacksburg Transit system.
- Study the benefits of an advisory regional planning commission that includes the towns of Blacksburg and Christiansburg, Montgomery County, Virginia Tech and other parties as appropriate.
- Form a community coalition on alcohol to continue to educate the public on alcohol use and on enforcement of alcohol-related offenses.
- Identify and utilize available local resources to perform services that benefit the entire community (e.g., Voluntary Action Committee, Greek organizations, YMCA, etc.).
- Create various programs targeted at providing non-alcoholic events such as "Glow in the Dark Golf", intramural sports, First Night Blacksburg, and innovative partnerships with local establishments such as promoting a "no alcohol" evening that rotates among restaurants.
- Encourage the Greek community, along with local civic organizations, to more effectively organize Adopt-a-Place programs to reduce or eliminate litter throughout Town, particularly in areas with off-campus housing or along popular pedestrian routes and rights-of-way.
- Develop countywide or regional economic incentives that promote and facilitate the preservation of area cultural amenities.
- Work with area governments to promote light pollution awareness and begin to replace older fixtures with newer, directionally focused lighting that does not "glow" or shine upward.
- Work with the university, the Virginia Tech Foundation, local industries, the Downtown Merchants, and the Corporate Research Center to provide private child day care that targets families associated with these entities but also provides service for the public at-large.

within 25 years

- Complete the implementation of the regional transportation study's recommendations by effectively coordinating regional projects between jurisdictions and by using VDOT funding allocations.
- Promote heritage tourism within the region in conjunction with the area's significant natural and cultural amenities.
- Partner with Virginia Tech to create enough capacity to provide 48 hours of water storage for the university.
- Identify other opportunities for short, medium, and long-term joint projects between partnering agencies and governments.